Ask No Small Question

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A planner thinks two decades down the road. He or she arranges the world to solve problems that are citywide, concerned with the long view, because that's his or her job.

Two days after the 1994 Northridge earthquake a colleague received a call from that city's Public Works Department. "Responding to your request for information about the apartment complex you are assessing for hazardous materials----our records show there have been no releases of toxins at the site." "Thank you," and hung up. My co-worker looked at me.

"Hundreds of buildings damaged or destroyed, city-wide outages of utilities, collapsed bridges and loss of life. But first thing Monday morning he chooses to return my call, the most routine data inquiry."

We discussed this. How could he have so dramatically inverted his priorities? Had he simply hunkered down into the familiar? Was he taking a deep breath, using routine to warm up before plunging into what would be an endless set of phenomenal tasks? We weren't in his shoes, we didn't know.

We planners are trained to build complex programs, solve intricate social and environmental issues. But emails and meetings send out a Siren call. They lure us into shallow waters. So often the daily demands can overwhelm our efforts to delve into the needs of the next decade.

Now we aren't all going to build new cities or save the rain forest, but we have all around us a set of questions of considerable substance, that, if we establish the appropriate priority and approach, will bring us employment in the business of important decisions.

This summer I had the good fortune to enjoy the company of the President's Science Advisor, John Holdren. Three hours across the table at a small dinner party. A discussion that ranged from fishing to global climate change.

Now if I had a nickel for every Presidential science advisor I ever met….well…I'd have a dime. In 1981 I was in a small seminar at MIT with Jerome Wiesner, former president of MIT and before that Science Advisor to President Kennedy. The course was titled the Arms Race in Modern Society and consisted of a first person accounting of the greatest policy efforts engaged in the Cold War. Dr. Wiesner convinced the President that America could suffice with a much smaller nuclear arsenal. This declaration was made to a man who used the "missile gap" to advance his presidential campaign—truth spoken to power. He also had the task of explaining nuclear "fallout" – a term we would all come to know – at a time when no one knew it.

The President's Science Advisor is the head of the Executive Office of Science and Technology Policy. He marshals resources of our nation's scientific infrastructure to frame, research and propose solutions to our most serious technological policy problems.

Now think for a moment and ask—what are the questions he must determine are necessary for the President's appraisal. There are countless policy matters. A century's worth of complex problems with which to grapple. What do you choose to occupy the mind and time of the most important policy maker on earth?

Dr. Wiesner sat in the room with the President during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He negotiated the test ban treaties with the Russians, he fought the military hawk's tendencies to overstate the Soviet missile capacity in order to augment our own—and he stood at a window in the Oval Office next to the President and explained that radioactive particles would be carried by the wind and fall with the rain, after which the President stood silently looking out the window at the clouds.

His office produced a report called "Use of Pesticides." This was in response to the national recognition of the problems of DDT raised by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The report provided the substrate for ushering in legislation that controlled the use of pesticides and other chemicals.

So what would you tell the President if he asked for a description of the most pressing technological issues of our day? Dr. Holdren addresses this question in "Science in the White House," a descriptive piece in *Science Magazine* on the process of his role with the President.

> "The cross-cutting foundations of success are: increasing the capacities and output of our country's fundamental research institutions, including our great research universities and major public and private laboratories and research centers; strengthening STEM education at every level, from precollege to postgraduate to lifelong learning; improving and protecting the information, communication, and transportation infrastructures that are essential to our commerce, science, and security alike; and maintaining and vigorously exploiting a cutting-edge set of capabilities in space,

> which must be understood not just as grand adventure and focus for expanding our knowledge of how the universe works, but also as a driver of innovation and a linchpin of communications, geopositioning technology, intelligence gathering, and Earth observation."[1]

Those are big questions. In fact, Dr. Holdren was a driving force to bring climate change to the forefront of American domestic policy. And where does the planner fit in this discussion? How are we to advance the discussion of big questions?

Planners, all of us, spend a considerable portion of our time putting out brush fires. Leash laws, plan checks, the deep legal inquiry as to whether a patio should be treated like a porch if the former is not enumerated in the zoning code.

But our training leads us elsewhere, into the most important questions facing the future of a municipality. It may be the need for a new sewer, an alternative mode of transportation, a reconciliation of a city's role and responsibility in managing its effects upon the global climate. It may be delivering a solution to a desperate lack of housing or establishing a course of correction for years of natural resource degradation.

There is the story of a professor who brought a big glass jar to class. He had cobblestones, gravel, sand and water. He put as many of the stones in the jar as he could fit. Then he filled it with gravel. Next the sand, and finally he poured in a gallon of water.

"What's the lesson here?" A student responds, "That there is always room for more." "No," replies the teacher, "That if you don't put the big rocks in first, there won't be room for them later."

Emails, staff meetings, phone calls. The political winds of public commentary. Oiling the turbulence caused between the shifting paradigms of councilmembers. These cannot be avoided. But they are the sand and water of our vessel. Our discipline is to find, fix and deliver the stones—only they last forever.

[1] In Science vol 324 no 5927; 1 May 2009.